Ross Dowson: A short biography

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Part 1: YOUTH

Ross Jewitt Dowson, Canada's foremost Trotskyist leader for half a century, was born in Toronto on September 4, 1917, not without some irony on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. He was raised in west Toronto, the third eldest in a family of seven siblings. His father, a skilled printer and a self-educated, militant atheist and humanist, introduced Ross to radical thought and spawned in him an interest in ideas and literature that lasted throughout Ross' life. The smell of printer's ink from a printing press and type font racks stored in his parents' basement stayed with Ross his whole life. His mother, the daughter of a school principal, contributed to the family income as a stenographer. She attempted at an early age to enthuse Ross with religious training at the local churches, but Ross sought his spiritualism elsewhere and was dissuaded from attending Sunday school because his oft-expressed skepticism embarrassed the church staff.

Ross Dowson was both a product and a shaper of the times he lived in. And what times they were! Ross came to maturity at a time of the Great Depression, a witness to the chaos of the capitalist system. He had seven siblings, both male and female, older and younger in his family. Young Ross had to learn how to find a place of his own while at the same time accepting the discipline of being part of a large family. He was a serious young boy who was given the all-important task of ensuring that his skilled printer-father made it home Friday evenings with his weekly paycheck intact and not dissipated at the local bar.

The Depression taught Ross what it meant to be a member of the working class. He saw hunger, strikes, marches, demonstrations and police repression. He witnessed those with little share what they

had, while those who had plenty kept it all to themselves. During this time, Ross read the novels and writings of John Dos Passos, Upton Sinclair, Andre Malraux, Emile Zola, John Reed and Jack London. A vision of a better world burned feverishly in his soul.

Ross also acquired a characteristic common to all members of the Dowson clan—a sense they could achieve whatever that they wanted and could decide for themselves what they would do with their lives. Ross seemed to interest himself in everything and threw himself with abandon into whatever he pursued. He was an avid tennis player. And for a time he was also a serious amateur photographer.

It was during the 1930's that Ross became involved in the Trotskyist movement whose cadres in Toronto and in Vancouver remained deeply imbedded in industrial unions following their expulsion from the Communist Party starting in 1928. Murray Dowson, Ross' elder brother by two years, had joined the Trotskyist Workers' Party of Canada while a student at York Memorial Collegiate in north-west Toronto. The Workers' Party was established in 1934 by Jack McDonald, former leader of the Communist Party, and by Maurice Spector, who had earlier been the Communist Party's principal theoretician. These giants of the Communist movement became signatories of an appeal initiated by Trotsky in 1935 for the creation of the Fourth International following the complete Stalinization of the Communist Third International and its conversion from a revolutionary to a reformist and counter-revolutionary force. The Fourth International was eventually launched in 1938.

Becoming a revolutionist

Ross tagged along with Murray to meetings of the Party, a nuisance Murray found hard to shake. Ross was impressed by the classes on scientific socialism held by the Mount Dennis Spartacus Club named after the famous slave rebel leader of ancient Rome. At the age of 17, Ross announced to his bewildered mother and his family that he had decided to dedicate his life to being a professional revolutionary, whereupon he formally joined the Trotskyist movement, in the middle of the depression years. He remained a Trotskyist until his last breath 67 years later.

Dowson, who until that time had been completely a product of the "Canadian experience", was suddenly exposed to the chaotic and heady mix of intellectual ferment in a movement which had a large contingent of members with European backgrounds. During these years of the depression, while still a student, Ross collected money for the McKenzie-Papineau Brigade in Spain, and he participated in support actions for the Eaton's garment factory strikers in Oshawa as well as striking autoworkers. The Toronto locals of the United Auto Workers were later among the first to affiliate to the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, the CCF, precursor to the present-day New Democratic Party. He sold the Vanguard, the Workers' Party's paper, and helped organize open air meetings at Earlscourt Park. One day, he was encouraged to do the speaking himself. From then on, there was no turning back.

Ross learned how to run the Gestetner duplicator, participated in May Day marches and unemployed workers' demonstrations, and helped build the Workers' Party. It was during this time that he met Maurice Spector. Together with James P. Cannon, a leader of the U.S. Socialist Party, Spector had attended the 1928 Sixth World Congress of the Communist International in Moscow. They were the first in North America to become partisans of Leon Trotsky, whose perilous isolation in Russia shortly afterwards led to his exile from the Soviet Union in 1929. Trotsky's supporters were subsequently expelled from Communist Parties throughout the globe, including Canada. Returning from Moscow in 1928, Spector had managed to smuggle out from Moscow Trotsky's critique of the direction of the Comintern, whose revolutionary program and policies were being sacrificed by an increasingly bureaucratic and conservative leadership under Stalin.

Although the Canadian Trotskyist movement was limited in its political influence, Ross quickly became politically cross-fertilized by the intellectual ferment within the Workers' Party, which had significant connections both to Jewish trade unionists and to Ukrainian comrades who published their own paper in the Ukrainian language. He sold copies of the Vanguard at factories, organized a Trotskyist youth group at York Memorial Collegiate, and tried unsuccessfully to organize a union at Canada Packers where he worked during the summer months.

Ross was also part of a group which helped workers being subjected to mass evictions move their furniture back into their homes, and which also helped the homeless take possession of Coronation Park at Keele and Eglinton. For two months they built burrows in the ground, with shacks overhead for shelter, until the police broke up the occupation.

At this time Ross played an active role in vying with the larger Communist Party for leadership of the unemployed workers' movement, in particular the unemployed youth, who were fighting to receive cash relief instead of dehumanizing food vouchers.

He later recalled feasting on baked goods and sweets at the home of an activist friend who lived across the road where he would attend discussions following meetings at a local hall. This was a real treat for Ross, who, as one of seven children, subsisted on a stripped-down diet of barley soup, beans, bread and jam.

Following the spring of 1936 during the Moscow Show Trials when the campaign against Trotskyism became especially virulent, comrades who sold the Trotskyist paper were frequently attacked by Stalinist goon squads. Jack MacDonald, the former General Secretary of the Communist Party who had been expelled following Trotsky's exile from Russia in 1929, had retired from the Workers' Party by this time. After Maurice Spector left Toronto for New York to work full-time for the Socialist Workers' Party alongside its leader James P. Cannon, the Workers' Party lacked a central and coherent leadership.

In June 1936, after completing grade 13, Ross' life was at a turning point. With his father no longer working, he got a job to help support his family. At the same time, he continued to focus on his political work on building the Workers' Party, organizing aid for the Spanish revolutionists, and defending working class actions from attacks by Canadian fascists.

Ross also participated in the pioneering efforts of the Workers' Party to enter and work within the CCF, which the Workers' Party saw as representing independent labor and farmers' political interests. It was during this time that the Cooperative Commonwealth Youth Movement (CCYM) Executive withheld a club charter from a club Ross had organized on his own initiative. The CCF bureaucrats wanted no club at all rather than one that had Ross in it.

The issue of entryism

Perhaps the central strategic challenge that small revolutionary Marxist organizations have had to face over the decades, in several countries including Canada, has been their relationship to the much larger mass-based labor, Socialist and Communist parties. Ross's approach to this issue was not clarified overnight and reflected the difficult lessons which he learned in the 1930s.

The issue of entryism was not easily resolved within the Workers' Party. Trotskyists and others under their influence, especially from Toronto and Vancouver, had already been present in significant numbers as delegates from industrial unions and ridings at the founding Convention of the CCF in Regina in 1933.

However, the lack of momentum in the CCF, and the bureaucratic manipulation and red-baiting by the CCF leadership caused internal friction among Canadian Trotskyists. When the Workers' Party later came to consider entering and working within the CCF, the only known version at that time of this type of entry tactic was the so-called "French Turn". Entry into the mass workers' parties had been experienced only in its "deep" variant, involving the dissolution of the Trotskyist organization's public face. Comrades were considered "closed"; that is, they did not identify themselves openly as Trotskyists as a rule and they therefore gave up publishing their own paper.

At a convention of the Workers' Party following a heated debate, by a vote of 35 to 20, the convention decided to enter the CCF, which it did in May, 1937. The minority, however, refused to liquidate their public face in order to participate in the entry and continued to distribute Trotskyist literature publicly although they stopped publishing the Vanguard. However, the anticipated growth of the left wing of the CCF did not materialize. Soon, the Trotskyists who had entered the CCF as individuals and not as a recognized tendency were feeling demoralized by the lack of vitality in the CCF. Eventually each component of the Trotskyist movement, the one that stayed outside of the CCF and the one that worked within it, disintegrated as coherent organizations. Ross initially worked inside the CCF. However, by disposition, he identified politically with those comrades in the Worker's Party who opposed the "deep" entryism into the CCF and the liquidation of the paper as the public face of the Trotskyist movement at a time when the CCF was less than a viable and growing force.

It was at this time that Ross began to develop his flexibility in applying political principles to complex situations. From the majority, he learned of the importance of orienting to the mass expression of independent class politics which the CCF had begun to represent. From the minority, he recognized the necessity of the movement maintaining an independent public profile—above all its own press—and that a headquarters or bookstore and public forums were critical to maintaining the visibility of the Trotskyist movement as a pole of attraction.

He also learned that the organization had to maintain its independent existence, even if only in a covert form, in order to maintain political clarity in "the swamp" that characterized the careerist, bureaucratic milieu nurtured by the opportunistic CCF leadership. This could be done by having some comrades play a "closed" role inside the CCF while other comrades, those previously expelled from the CCF, would be "open". It was largely as a result of these difficult lessons first learned in the 1930s that the Canadian Trotskyist movement developed the flexibility and perspective that enabled it to eventually transform itself into a movement numbering in the hundreds while influencing thousands and even tens of thousands decades later.

Fom the minority, Ross also learned that the CCF (and later the NDP) could be the focus of the movement's politics, but not necessarily always its main arena of political activity, especially when the Party was stagnating and in retreat. The concept of entryism on the basis of fraction work within a mass-based labour party with a long-term, non-split perspective was unique in the world Trotskyist movement, contrasting sharply with the "deep entryism" of the US comrades in the Socialist Party and the French comrades throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. It constitutes Ross Dowson's most significant and lasting contribution to the tactics of the world Trotskyist movement.

It was natural that Ross would tend to identify with the forces of Trotskyism that wanted to be open about their ideas. He hated wavering. He was repelled by people that were less than honest about their views and were open to manipulation. The petit-bourgeois leadership of the CCF, its tendency to adapt itself to whatever way the political wind was blowing, and its lack of firm working class roots and class solidarity were alien to Ross' character. Although he knew that he had to present his views concretely in

a way that would be meaningful to the majority of advanced workers, he was personally uncomfortable with restraining himself from the full expression of his views. It was therefore natural for Ross to feel personally more at ease proclaiming his views openly and not engaging in tactical adaptation. Thus, from the time that Ross was expelled from the CCYM (the CCF youth wing) while still a teenager, he remained on a personal level an "open" comrade for the rest of his life.

In these early years of applying an orientation to a labor formation such as the CCF, the sophisticated positions that were worked out under Ross's leadership in later years were yet to be fully developed. An effort that was only partially successful was made to fuse the majority and minority positions. Although entryism was to last only until the fall convention of the CCF in 1938, the majority of comrades wanted to continue their experience with entryism afterwards. The minority wanted unity with the majority but was in limbo. The majority under the leadership of the well-known poet and writer Earle Birney and other intellectuals, continued the entry into the CCF, even publishing a left-wing paper until they were finally expelled in 1938, in an unceremonious conclusion to their entrist experiment.

The comrades then re-established their political presence by publicly launching the Socialist Workers' League (SWL). This happened at a time when war clouds were on the horizon. Before they could consolidate and renew their national connections, the Second World War broke out. The War Measures Act was proclaimed, and the Canadian Trotskyist movement was driven undergound.

PART 2: THE WAR YEARS

The times were tough for a movement that openly opposed the war. Although continuing to work at various jobs between 1938 and 1942 to support himself and his family, Ross found time to organize anti-fascist demonstrations and defend opponents of the Second World War. The Socialist Workers' League saw its forces decimated, especially its intellectual leadership. Earle Birney unexpectedly and without warning abandoned politics and Marxism as a whole and enlisted in the army. With Trotsky's murder in Mexico by a Stalinist agent in August 1940, the movement suffered yet another major blow.

The few remaining forces of the League decided to get jobs in basic industry in 1941 in order to implant themselves in the key trade unions. During this time of decline of open revolutionary activity, Ross picked up the loose strings, trying to create a united movement and keep the public face of the SWL going under the conditions of illegality following the proclamation of the War Measures Act. This included distributing an underground paper until 1942. Accepting responsibility for the functioning of the movement as a whole, Ross moved from being a leader of the movement to becoming the leader of the movement.

This transformation took place under conditions of extreme adversity which framed Ross with a disposition that reflected the weightiness of the task before him and contributed to his disdain for political dilettantes. Ross did not suffer fools gladly and saw the dissidents around the movement, especially the kibbitzers and raconteurs, as threatening its unity. He was suspicious of dissenters, perhaps excessively so, as he had seen them abandon the movement or threaten it with interminable debate. He took over the publication of the banned paper, which was inserted into library books or dropped from tall buildings on crowds of workers in downtown Toronto until it stopped publication in June, 1942. With limited opportunities for open work, Ross undertook to pull together the meager forces that continued to identify with Trotskyism on the basis of political clarity and a program. As the editor of the paper, he became engaged in developing a political line and a series of demands that would address the interests of workers at their present state of consciousness but at the same time engage them to struggle for workers' power and socialism.

First a cross-Canada tour, then a tour in the Army

In 1941, Ross went on a western tour where he renewed connections that the movement had established during the 1930s. It was a difficult trek that took Ross to various centres including Saskatoon, Lloydminster, Medicine Hat, Alberta and eventually Vancouver, where he met many old militants. In Vancouver, he spent a month with Paddy Stanton, an ex-Wobbly and CCF acivist, who led local struggles against the wartime no-strike pledge promoted by the Communist Party, which in fact suppressed working class demands in order to support the war effort.

Shortly afterward, Ross traveled back to Toronto and enlisted in the army in 1942, which was then a precondition to getting a job. His doctor assured him he would be rejected because he had flat feet. Instead, to his surprise, he found himself donning a uniform in 1942 and conscripted into the service of Her Majesty's Armed Forces. For the next two years, Ross was stationed at Camp Borden advancing from private to corporal in the Canadian infantry and eventually becoming a second lieutenant. He tried to resign from his commission- in order to allow himself greater freedom as a private-but his efforts were rebuffed by the army brass. Still, he was able to circulate anti-war literature to his soldier friends, two of whom were recruited to the Socialist Workers' League.

As the war was drawing to a close, he led a fight to block army efforts to recruit soldiers to lay and tamp tracklines between Toronto and Hamilton at army rates of pay instead of regular workers' wages. Ross led a protest at a railroad job site after refusing to carry out a direct order that would require him to work in isolation from the rest of the detail. As was his duty, he advised his second-in-command of his intended protest and the obligation he had to arrest Ross. Ross organized the resulting protest amongst the privates. On being arrested, he was escorted by two soldiers who paraded him back to camp to be confined to barracks. But, as agreed, the 45 men on the detail also fell in behind him. They were all confined to barracks with Ross, risking dishonorable discharge.

While on leave however, Ross attended a weekend CCF picnic in Toronto, and told CCF leader M.J. Coldwell about the Army exploiting its soldiers as low-wage labor. Coldwell shortly afterwards denounced this practice in the House of Commons, and the McKenzie King government was forced to immediately begin demobilization, and to start paying current wage rates to soldiers.

A few weeks later in December 1944, the brass bid Ross adieu as they discharged him from the army, releasing him once again to play the role of a dutiful private citizen.

PART 3: THE POST-WAR YEARS

As the war neared its end, the Socialist Workers' League initiated efforts to regroup itself. In October 1944, the League met in Montreal, electing Ross as its secretary pending his release from the army. In addition to attendance by fifteen members each from Toronto and Vancouver, representatives came from Niagara Falls, Prince Rupert, Ottawa, Montreal and several other regions including Saskatchewan. Plans were made for a new paper, this time a legal one, to start publishing in June, 1945. The resistance to sacrifices for the war effort was growing as the conservatism of the working class was breaking up.

The post-war years saw a dramatic growth in labor militancy with the return of young soldiers who had just risked their lives to fight for democracy and who were not only expecting but demanding good jobs, adequate housing, and a decent standard of living. It was a time of heady struggles, which saw the unionization of the steel industry in Canada. (Labor historian Bryan Palmer quotes statistics that show that in 1946 to 1947, large strikes caused well over 7 million worker-days lost in Canada.)

In order to meet the new challenges and opportunities which had opened up, the Canadian Trotskyists founded a new organization, the Revolutionary Workers' Party, and began moving out boldly in their own name. In Vancouver, two pioneers of the Canadian Communist Party, Max Armstrong and Malcolm Bruce, joined the Trotskyist movement at the war's end, contributing their talents and experiences in order to rebuild the party they had seen destroyed politically as a revolutionary force since the end of the 1920s—the Communist Party. They were joined by Reg and Ruth Bullock, who became the mainstay of the Revolutionary Workers' Party (RWP) and later the Socialist Information Centre as the Trotskyist movement became known in British Columbia, remaining active as militants subsequently well into the 1970s and up to their deaths in the 1980s. The movement in British Columbia was well-implanted in the broad and influential left wing of the CCF and exercised considerable influence in some trade unions including the Woodworkers Union where Jean-Marie Bédard became the eastern Canadian head of the International Woodworkers of America (I.W.A.)

The post-war resurgence

Prominent leaders and members of the Revolutionary Workers' Party in Toronto included Ross' brothers Murray and Hugh Dowson, his sisters Lois and Joyce, Joyce's husband Joe Rosenthal, and Ken Sutherland. Labour Challenge, as the RWP paper was then called, began publication as a biweekly eight-page newspaper with a circulation in the thousands. Members of the movement were active in the United Auto Workers, the Rubber Workers Union, the Teamsters and the needle trades.

In Toronto, Ross Dowson played a critical role in the post-war foundation of the Revolutionary Workers' Party. He assumed the position of executive secretary, edited the paper, ran for public office, and continued his lifelong avocation as a full-time revolutionist living a frugal life on the dues and pledges of the comrades. Although dedicating his life to party-building on a daily basis, Ross also found time to read the novels of James T. Farrell, Sinclair Lewis and John Steinbeck, to follow and study the Bauhaus design school, the murals of Rivera, the history of Dadaism and to nurture his passionate interest in architecture about which he had fiercely held views and was a profession to which he himself had once aspired in his early youth.

Though still only in his late 20s, Ross had already undergone serious training in the rigors of Marxist thought. Ross was not an abstract theoretician—for him each concept had to be seen and applied in context and tied to a specific tasks. Then, he could exhibit brilliant insight. Ross had seen the leader of his co-thinkers in the United States, James P. Cannon, defend the political line of the movement against efforts in the late 1930s to dump its defense of the Soviet Union while at the same time against adapting to the pressure to support the war, exerted by the Communist Party after the collapse of the Stalin-Hitler Pact and the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. **

He had developed an understanding of the importance of a political program that addressed the needs of the majority of the working class and that avoided the pitfalls of sectarianism or liquidation into whatever political current was fashionable on the reformist left at any particular time. Comrades came from far and wide to consult Ross on tactical questions and practical issues in their areas of work, always leaving with a deeper understanding of what they could achieve.

In 1945 a Labour Party government was elected under Clement Atlee in England on a program which reflected the militancy of the British working class, including public ownership of the railways, mines, and steel industry. The victory in Britain raised the hope and the possibility of workers in Canada also electing the CCF to power whose cross-country popularity had soared in the mid-war years.

True, the longevity of capitalism had exceeded everyone's expectations. However, the Transitional Program expounded by Leon Trotsky and adopted as its program at the founding Congress of the Fourth International in 1938, outlined a series of demands to mobilize workers in struggles that would weaken the capitalist system while enhancing the unity and political understanding of the working class as a whole. Under Ross Dowson's leadership the Revolutionary Workers' Party became an effective exponent of such a program, tailoring it to meet Canada's particular political reality. The RWL framed its Transitional Program within the need for workers, as a first step to taking political power in Canada, to break from the capitalist parties and to elect CCF governments in Ottawa and in each province.

The RWP moves out

When the CCF did not live up to this challenge, the RWP moved out itself. One of the areas in which the CCF failed to provide a labor alternative was municipal politics. In the absence of CCF or labor candidates running in Toronto mayoralty campaigns, Ross filled the bill, contesting the mayoralty to ensure that the class was not left without an alternative to capitalist politicians at the ballot box.

With an uncanny ability to reduce complex ideas to a few simple words and with the experience of visual communication that he had gained from his lithographic background, Ross churned out dozens of pamphlets and leaflets during this period. In addition, he sustained the movement's weekly Friday evening public forums on topics of current interest, edited its biweekly paper, and oversaw its intervention in the CCF. In one of several election campaigns for mayor in Toronto, Ross published a brochure that was distributed to tens of thousands of homes.

It showed a worker with his sleeves rolled up sweeping out two fat capitalists with dollar signs on their tuxedos from the corridors of City Hall. One out of every five Torontonians voted for Ross in that election causing the Globe and Mail, the staid voice of Canada's bourgeois circles, to vehemently excoriate the Toronto populace, in a front page editorial the day following the election, for voting in such large numbers for a person with a subversive foreign ideology.

Throughout these heady times when the labor movement was flexing its muscles, Ross continued to play a multiplicity of roles. From the time that Labour Challenge proclaimed "There is no Peace" in its first post-war edition coinciding with Armistice Day in 1945 until the chill of the Cold War caused working class militancy to evaporate, Ross provided tactical guidance to the trade unions comrades in the movement. He edited and himself wrote a good part of Labour Challenge, which he also helped distribute at factory gates. He organized an educational program that included movie showings, panel discussions, and public forums on the issues of the day.

He raised the public face of the movement by professionally managing a number of bookstores over the years (one of which was described in a review published in a Toronto daily, as operated by a proprietor who clearly "loved" books. These bookstores were stocked with all the critical writings of the revolutionaries as well as the great classics of literature, philosophy, art, and science.

He corresponded extensively with comrades across Canada and the world, he was a key activist and organizer in the Toronto branch and he applied himself diligently on a daily basis to "clipping the papers" so that key developments could be consistently followed in preparation for editorial board discussions, for public forums, and for internal educational events and discussion. A larger movement would, of course, have had different comrades performing each of these roles. Unfortunately, the tiny Canadian Trotskyist movement unfortunately could not afford such luxury. Ross therefore stepped into the role of theoretical leader, organizer, editor, and agitator.

What was it about Ross that enabled him to fulfil so many roles? The answer lies in several of his personal attributes. First, Ross had a strong sense of what was objectively possible, an appreciation of the role that an individual could actually play in shaping forces that could affect history, and he had a strong sense of responsibility and obligation to fulfil this role. His political vision was shaped by Jack MacDonald, Maurice Spector, and other giants of the Trotskyist movement who had similarly dedicated their lives to free the working class. He was imbued with the same spirit of dedication and class solidarity that they had, and the same down-to-earth attitude of rolling up your sleeves and getting the job done.

Second, Ross' commitment to socialism was concrete and action-oriented. He excelled in connecting the here and now to the future, in linking what existed to what had to be done. Ross knew that, to walk a mile, you had to start with a first step. He saw the interconnectedness of all the steps as a continuum. Whatever adversities he faced, tactical solutions became evident to him. He was able to connect the dots. Even in the darkest days of the movement's existence, he was always able to see the future and work to realize it. Third and perhaps most important, Ross experienced a genuine joy in his political life, which gave him reason and purpose to exist. He never asked anyone to do anything he wasn't prepared to do himself. He told the comrades that they were the most important persons on earth. He had a great sense of the historical purpose and role of the working class about which he held no illusions yet to which he dedicated himself with a great sense of passion. He cast himself in the mold of Trotsky, whose sense of personal obligation in the historic process led him to state, "Each of us carries a particle of history on his back," and "Let the Philistines hunt their individuality in empty space." Finally, Ross was imbued with a high level of energy and physical stamina, pacing himself for the end-run as he applied himself methodically to each task at hand.

The dog days of the 1950s

It was not long, however, before the international red scare was launched by the United States and Britain. The Witch Hunt was first initiated in Canada in 1946 with the Gouzenko spy scandal and accelerated with the Iron Curtain speech by Churchill in Fulton, Missouri, which marked the start of the Cold War, the massive buildup of nuclear weapons, and the threat of nuclear annihilation. This new climate isolated and weakened the Trotskyist movement once again, along with the Left as a whole. By the early 1950s, following the ebb of the labor upsurge, the red-baiting hysteria which resulted in McCarthyism in the United States had taken its toll on the Canadian movement as well. Its members were subjected to overwhelming state surveillance of their legitimate activities by the RCMP as part of its illicit "Operation Odd-Job" and many comrades found themselves expelled from the CCF.

Then, in 1953, the Fourth International itself suddenly split. One of its key European leaders, Michel Pablo, argued that, since the capitalist class was driving the world to a nuclear war, the Trotskyist movement did not have time for patient, educational work. It was urgently necessary to immediately and covertly implant all of the movement's meager forces into existing communist, socialist, and labor parties. This perspective projected a replenishing of forces regrouped in open revolutionary struggle in time to prevent the impending third world war that threatened the survival of the human race. The majority in Canada under the leadership of Ross Dowson sided with the US Socialist Workers' Party as well as other Trotskyist groups, mostly from the British Commonwealth, in opposing this perspective.

A serious, bitter, and demoralizing rift split the Canadian movement as the Pabloite minority in Canada abandoned the RWL following a fierce debate. The forces of Trotskyism had already been severely weakened by the intensification of the Cold War and the launching of the Korean War. With the CCF itself in a state of rapid decline, the RWL was reduced to only a few adherents around Reg and Ruth

Bullock in Vancouver and Ross Dowson in Toronto with a few “members-at-large” in between. The Vancouver comrades renamed themselves the Socialist Information Centre (SIC), while the Toronto group identified themselves as the Socialist Educational League (SEL).

Both operated out of modest bookstores and adjacent halls, held public forums on a weekly basis, and sought to consolidate and educate the forces around them against enormous social pressures to abandon revolutionary politics. Although some of the comrades who embraced Pablo’s position later maintained an antagonistic attitude toward the established organization refused to work with it or abandoned politics altogether, others returned to its ranks in the late fifties.

Although harassed and isolated, the SEL in Toronto nevertheless managed to attract a small number of sophisticated and highly capable new cadres. Older comrades, including Ross’s brothers, Murray and Hugh, and his sister Joyce, remained active in the Autoworkers, Rubber Workers, the Teamsters and the needle trade unions and helped Ross maintain the continuity of the organization and its politics.

Meanwhile, newer, younger leaders were beginning to step in, including Ken Sutherland, Pat Schulz, and Jim Mitchell who became the editor of a new Trotskyist journal Workers Vanguard in December 1955.

Comrades from the SEL intervened in the comparatively few struggles taking place during this era, notably the “Ban the Bomb” and the anti-nuclear shelter movement that began gaining momentum by the mid-to-late fifties. Under Ross’s leadership, the SEL sought out every opportunity to replenish its meager forces. When the Communist Party fell apart in 1956 and 1957 following Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev’s revelations of Stalin’s crimes and his brutal repression of the Hungarian Revolution, the SEL moved out aggressively in an unsuccessful attempt to win over dissidents who were leaving the Communist Party in droves.

From revolutionist to revolutionary

Ross’ outstanding accomplishment during this time was his utter tenacity. He refused to abandon the lessons that he had learned with difficulty in favor of illusory shortcuts or panicky reactions. He offered no room to and refused to truck with those who were prepared to dump their traditions because the going was rough. The tougher the going, the more intolerant Ross became of those who wavered under pressure. It was during this period that, one can say, Ross turned from a revolutionist to a revolutionary, from one who aspired to make a revolution to one who proved that he had the mettle to achieve one.

The survival of the movement was at stake. Heated discussions took place during this decade of witch-hunts and the severe isolation of socialists, of the world-wide post-war business boom and the general quiescence of the labour movement. Outside of the anti-nuclear war movement and the defence of victims of state repression, there were few political arenas to intervene in to replenish the now thin ranks of the organization. All of this took place at a time of virulent anti-Communism during which the CCF itself declined as a meaningful political force and no longer offered a viable alternative to the capitalist parties nor effectively played the role of the voice of the labor movement in the corridors of parliamentary power.

Just as Ross’ tenacity kept the ideas of scientific socialism alive in the fight against Pabloism, so did his tenacity keep the organization in Toronto alive during this nadir of its existence. Ross searched out every opportunity to build the movement, even if this meant only an occasional recruit. A caravan was organized to visit cities large and small across Canada, both east and west of Toronto, door to door, to

sell copies and renew subscriptions to Workers' Vanguard as the paper was then known and to keep in touch with contacts.

These cross-country caravans were admittedly targeted by the RCMP Security Service which, on several occasions, interfered with the caravan's work including breaking into the vans the comrades used to travel across the country, and stealing their subscription records and other material. Ross even encouraged the comrades to distribute literature at evangelical rallies at Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens pointing out that our ideas might be of interest to the thousands of young, impatient people who wanted salvation on earth now. At the same time, classes on Marxist economics and other topics were held regularly.

Young recruits such as Ernie Tate, Alan Harris, Cliff Orchard, Pat Brain, and John Darling led several "Trailblazers tours" across the country at this time selling the Workers' Vanguard at plant gates and subscriptions door-to-door and keeping in touch with political contacts from Sydney, Nova Scotia to the Prairies, and to the Pacific Coast. In Toronto, a consistent campaign to sell copies of the American Trotskyist youth paper Young Socialist at high schools recruited a number of rebel youth, including Harry Kopyto and Mitch Podolak.

With the CCF in rapid decline, Ross challenged the CCF leadership to step aside from fielding a candidate in a provincial election to allow the Socialist Educational League to contest a seat in a riding where the CCF had no chance of success. When the CCF brass refused, Ross ran as a candidate anyway in order to ensure that the voice of socialism would be heard.

Part 4: THE YOUTH AND STUDENT RADICALIZATION

By 1960, the international situation had begun to turn around. The Cuban Revolution and the struggle for equal rights by Blacks in the United States gave rise to frame a new era of political activity. What's more, in 1961, the CCF dissolved itself. The New Party, later to be renamed the New Democratic Party, emerged from the CCF's shell and reconstituted itself with strong organic links to the labor movement. Ross foresaw the significance of the new party which grew in part out of the unification of Canada's two main trade union federations in Canada. He himself attended the formal founding convention in Ottawa, supporting the left-wing of the party under MP Hazen Argue that challenged the New Party leadership on a left, anti-NATO program. On the other hand, Ross hailed elected leader Tommy Douglas' vow that the NDP would pose the need for socialism in the upcoming federal elections.

Under Ross's initiative, Canadian Trotskyists quickly responded to the new political situation. In 1961 the Socialist Education League and the Socialist Information Centre formally united, establishing the League for Socialist Action (LSA), in order to take advantage of the new openings offered by the founding of the New Democratic Party and the unfolding colonial revolution. Shortly before, a youth section, the Young Socialists, had been established by the younger comrades which remained organizationally autonomous and independent, but in political solidarity with the LSA.

Sympathizers of the Canadian Trotskyist movement were encouraged to establish and lead the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC) in which the League played the leading role in defence of the Cuban Revolution. This organization held demonstrations, raised funds, organized speaking tours, held banquets and organized tours to Cuba, while distributing by the tens of thousands Castro's Second Declaration of Havana outlining the socialist nature of the Cuban Revolution, along with the LSA's own pamphlets and newsletters on the Cuban Revolution.

Meanwhile, comrades not only joined the NDP but were encouraged to play an active role in its riding association executives and, in some cases, work as election campaign organizers. New, young members were being attracted to the Young Socialists one by one, often recruited from the New Democratic Youth (NDY), therefore playing a decisive role in a renewed and rapid growth of the Canadian Trotskyist movement.

The Workers' Vanguard increased its frequency of publication, as well as its circulation. During this time, comrades played critical roles in several union struggles including that of Teamsters Union Local 938 which, under the leadership of a caucus led by Harry Paine and initiated by the LSA, succeeded in closing down the trucking industry in Ontario for an entire month in 1962, while continuing to publish militant caucus bulletins over a three-year period.

As the League's influence grew in the NDY and its forces were posed to win the organization to pro-Cuban and anti-NATO positions, in 1963, 14 youth comrades along with Peter Woodsworth, a grandnephew of the CCF's founder and leader, were expelled from the New Democratic Party. This significantly added to the forces available to play "open" roles in the League for Socialist Action and the Young Socialists, and thus marked a dramatic growth in the Trotskyists movement's public presence. In fact, a broad, aggressive campaign was launched within the NDP and NDY against the expulsions, which included a pamphlet and speaking tour that resulted in still more NDP youth joining the Young Socialists. As the movement against the war in Vietnam began to coalesce along with the student power movement in 1964, the forces of the movement doubled in size in a very short period of time as it aggressively recruited a new layer of young activists as well as some seasoned militant trade unionists. The Young Socialists established its own headquarters at 32 Cecil Street in Toronto, published an attractive monthly magazine, Young Socialist Forum, formed the backbone of the campus-based committees to end the war in Vietnam, established high school committees against the war, and played central roles in the emerging movements for women's liberation, defence of the colonial revolution, and solidarity with the Black struggle in the southern United States.

Burgeoning growth and independent activity

To facilitate the discussion of its work and to accommodate its larger membership, the Toronto branch was subdivided into three locals, one east, one west, and one in north Toronto, which met on alternate weeks. By 1965, most of the comrades in the movement assumed more modest positions on the NDP riding executives while at the same time moving out aggressively in the public eye, establishing several branches and locals of the League and Young Socialists in cities across Canada from Black's Harbour, New Brunswick to Victoria, BC. Comrades were sent across the country to "colonize" new local organizations in Winnipeg, Waterloo, London, Hamilton, Ottawa, Saskatoon, Edmonton, Kingston, and several other cities. Young Socialists contested student elections and were elected to the presidencies of Simon Fraser University and York University's student councils.

The sudden new growth of the Canadian Trotskyist movement and its increased public profile happened to coincide with a decline of militancy and opportunities within the NDP by the mid-1960s. While the NDP remained integral to the LSA's politics, the Trotskyist movement began to increasingly centre its day-to-day activities on the developing mass movements that were then emerging largely outside the NDP. The latter half of the 1960s witnessed an even more dramatic growth in the forces of the Canadian Trotskyist movement, which eventually consisted of some 350 to 400 adherents across the country. These comrades managed to exert a political influence far beyond what their numbers would ordinarily warrant. Between the YS and LSA local and federal offices in Toronto, a dozen comrades worked full-time for the movement during this period.

Ross as internationalist

During this time, Ross, forever an internationalist in his perspective, encouraged several comrades who had moved to Canada from elsewhere to return to their countries of origin. Ernie Tate and Pat Brain moved to England to work side by side with Bertrand Russell in the International War Crimes Tribunal set up to investigate US war crimes in Vietnam. Keith Locke became the principal spokesperson for the movement to oppose nuclear arms after he returned to New Zealand. Other comrades returned or went to Scotland, Mexico, Australia and the United States. In addition, a comrade and medical doctor, Gustavo Tolentino, was invited to Vietnam to investigate the effects of napalm and of anti-personnel bombs used by the US.

It was during this time that Camp Poundmaker was founded. A summer camp built on a few acres of rocky terrain north of Deseronto, mid-way between Toronto and Montreal, the Camp was named after the great Native leader who sought unity in the struggle for native rights. From the Victoria Day weekend in May when a fireworks display was the main attraction to the Thanksgiving Day weekend in October when homemade honey ham, roast turkey and pumpkin pie were the feature, the Camp became a centre for educationals, discussions, meetings, conferences plus swimming, softball games and plain old fun. Ross led dozens of young comrades on mushroom-hunting expeditions. Hundreds of comrades over the years spent weeks, weekends and, sometimes whole summers at the camp as working volunteers or vacationing at the large lodge built by the comrades themselves and sleeping over in tiny cabins scattered throughout the grounds. In addition, half a dozen summer homes were built on the campgrounds by older comrades with families who chose to stay there during the summer or who visited on weekends. Bonfires, card games, sing-songs and intense political discussions all melded into one comradely stream at the camp. Ross was instrumental in both buying and maintaining the camp. He believed that the movement should try to accommodate all the needs of the comrades.

Ross never married-such a commitment would have diverted him from the main aim of his life. As a professional revolutionary, Ross devoted his life entirely to building the Trotskyist movement—he nevertheless lived his life fully. He loved and cared for his family deeply. He compensated for not having children by enjoying the children around the movement and within his family. His favourite gifts to children were often books that would open their eyes to the classic works of verse and prose of humanity. His gifts to adults were often works of art that resonated with a greater purpose and a collective humanity. He played the role of a loving uncle to the son and three daughters of his brother, Hugh, who died prematurely from a heart attack in February 1976. Ross encouraged them to take risks, live their lives fully, and struggle to realize their goals.

Ross: the revolutionary personality

Ross made sure the LSA headquarters always had 50-cent lunches of jam, peanut butter, bread and drinks available in the hall at the back of the bookstore, where forums were held and everyone was welcome. The halls usually also accommodated meeting rooms, a fridge, libraries, duplicators and sometimes a Multilith press to print the papers and pamphlets.

Throughout this period, as well as throughout his life, Ross collected works of art from around the world especially sculptures which he loved. Particularly, he developed an extensive personal library, subscribed to Scientific American, decorated the walls of his tiny apartment in downtown Toronto with pictures of far-off universes and exploding galaxies, collected art books and prints of his favorite artists' works, listened to music (Bob Dylan and Barbara Streisand were among his favorites during their heyday) and he maintained active contact with several poets (Al Purdy, Milton Acorn and Joe Rosenblatt and others dropped in regularly to see him).

He refused to travel to the Third World because of the starkness of the poverty he would have had to face. Ross was a good partygoer, often breaking into spontaneous song or imitating a singer in an exaggerated fashion. He was a smooth, assured dancer and he loved a good joke. He would often resort to an exaggerated gesture to make a point. When some difficult task was at hand, he would sometimes sweep his hand forward with a gracious bow and say, “After you, Alphonse.”

His standard of living was necessarily frugal. He described himself humorously as having become a profiteer when he wrote in a letter to his mother that he was receiving $3.00 a day as his army pay. Although Ross used to say that a daily revolutionary paper should have a sports page, he was aghast at the waste of effort some workers exerted in memorizing sports scores.

Ross promoted women to leading positions in the movement well before feminism was current. Pat Schulz, who later became a highly respected feminist, was the Toronto LSA organizer in the early 1960’s. Ross did unexpected things in his writing, such as using the phrase “Women and men…” instead of “Men and women…” as his journalistic contribution to consciousness-raising. He would never edit for style. He himself wrote in a dense style that reflected the complex interconnectedness of his thoughts that has variously been described as convoluted or “muscular” (Ernest Mandel). Ross vigorously opposed having the movement take positions on life style questions. He himself only started watching TV late in life. Aside from the daily news, he preferred public television and Television Ontario. He allowed himself few indulgences in food, yet he did love a sip of Advocaat and an occasional Ferrera-Rocher, waxing ecstatic over such delicacies.

Ross made every effort to integrate new comrades into the leadership of the movement. He welcomed the new forces entering the movement in the 60s and early 70s with open arms. He respected the autonomy of the youth movement and its right to make its own decisions whether he agreed with them or not. Comrades found, however, they had to be prepared to defend their positions when Ross was involved in discussions and debates. Ross was formidable and could even be intimidating when arguing his point of view. His impeccable logic, his insistence on disciplined thought, and his emphasis on the importance of implementing decisions once they were agreed upon, was evident to all who came in contact with him. Heated debate within the editorial board of the Workers’ Vanguard and later Labour Challenge was quite common during this period of time

Whatever their differences, comrades were expected to fulfill the norms and obligations of membership, which involved both internal responsibilities as well as participation in an outside area of political work. Interestingly, some of the practices that the movement had developed over time, including security concerns that had become no longer necessary such as the use of pseudonyms to protect the identity of the comrades in the minutes of the League’s meetings, reflected habits that were shaped by another era.

In some respects, the very strengths that Ross exhibited—strengths that had ensured the survival of the movement in leaner times such as substituting himself for others when a job had to be done—were no longer productive in the context of a growing movement. Ross exhibited skepticism toward the movement’s dissidents and a tendency to be irascible and confrontational. While Ross was a good educator, encouraging comrades to read the Marxist classics—even helping them extensively in their own particular areas of interest and promoting them to positions of responsibility and leadership—he could be passionate, even explosive, when he perceived comrades were not serious and open to reconsider their positions. Such emotion, however, was not a product of inflexible thinking or a dogmatic approach. On the contrary, Ross’ thinking was fluid and remarkably intuitive. As an example,

the Three Mile Island nuclear meltdown and the nuclear catastrophe at Chernobyl caused him to rethink and then totally abandon his previous adamant support for nuclear power. Even in his evaluation of individuals, he would reconsider his opinions, often implicitly admitting his initial failure to appreciate a comrade's talents or his overestimation of another's abilities. And his contempt for dogma showed itself when, for instance, in the 1960s, he vehemently debated those like Barry Lord, editor of Arts Canada, who advocated a narrow political line on questions of art.

The latter half of the 1960s witnessed a dramatic growth in the forces of the Trotskyist movement, which soon amassed some 350 adherents, who exerted a political influence much larger than such numbers would ordinarily warrant. With the NDP largely on the sidelines at the time, the Canadian Trotskyist movement moved out and established a high independent profile. The Young Socialists rented a house for their headquarters close to the University of Toronto campus. There were plays, dances, parties, forums, conferences, and a host of other events in addition to weekly meetings of the Young Socialists each Saturday. Between the YS and the LSA's local and federal offices, a dozen comrades worked full-time for the movement in Toronto during this period.

In Quebec, four comrades sent there in 1964 to "colonize" the Province became the core of a francophone movement known as the Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière / Ligue des Jeunes Socialistes (LSO/LJS) that soon numbered several dozen members and periphery. With Ross' insight and assistance, the LSO recognized the centrality of the fight for the defence of the French language in Quebec as the language of instruction in the schools and the language at work and immediately supported legislation to that effect. The LSO's clarity on this question gave it strong credibility in the nationalist movement. Some of the highlights of this period included the recruitment of a dozen francophone student activists from the radical wing of the nationalist movement during the strike led by l'Union Général des Étudiants de Québec in 1969, including several presidents of CEGEPs (Community Colleges) in the Montreal area.

In 1967, the League presented a brief to the federal government's Royal Commission on the Status of Women. Later published as an influential pamphlet, it outlined many of the critical demands and issues that were subsequently adopted by the women's movement in Canada thereby helping to provide direction for its future growth. Ross also oversaw the development of a clear and rounded analysis of the Native question in Canada and the advocacy of Red Power and self-determination for indigenous peoples. He initiated the LSA's founding and urged many leading comrades to build the Fair Play for Cuba Committee as the key defender of the Cuban Revolution in Canada during its critical first decade. He also actively participated in developing a program to democratize the universities and high schools, advocating student-faculty-support staff control of these institutions.

One of Ross's most significant contributions during this period was to inspire the L.S.A. to assume the leadership role in the anti-war movement in Canada. Throughout a series of hotly fought contests, Ross in fact helped establish the central political demands of this movement, above all the demand "End Canada's Complicity", a formulation he himself originated. Advancing the slogan "Withdraw US troops Now" as opposed to the Communist Party's timid demands to end the bombing and for a negotiated settlement, as well as against the slogan "Victory to the Viet Cong" promoted by various ultra-left forces, comrades from the LSA and Young Socialists organized and led the campus and high school committees to end the war in Vietnam. They were instrumental in all the main coalitions that organized the protests and demonstrations against the war in that era. No one active in the left during this time could avoid knowing of the Trotskyist movement and having to adopt a position in relation to it. It sometimes felt that the League was in a constant state of mobilization during that time, as its influence far exceeded what one would assume a hundred comrades would ordinarily obtain. This fact was well

appreciated by the RCMP Security Service which amassed a dossier on Ross that exceeded two thousand pages in one surveillance bank alone.

Three outstanding political developments

There were three outstanding political developments that took place during the height of the radicalization in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ross played a critical role in developing a cogent analysis and in orienting the Trotskyist movement in its intervention in each case.

The first event involved the momentous rise of a spirit of nationalism in Quebec. The nationalist movement was directed against the central Canadian federal state. Along with other comrades, Ross applied himself to analyzing the nature of this nationalist current and its political significance. As always, he tried to understand the essence of the phenomenon and what it signified. Ross' analysis showed that the nationalist mood that had characterized the previous period of Quebec history had been essentially petit-bourgeois in nature and reflected the desires of young educated elements of the Quebec society to compete effectively in French with anglophones in Quebec for available jobs.

This nationalist mood had by the 1960s infused itself into the ranks of the working class as a whole. Further, the nationalist movement reflected the collective yearnings of the Québécois for an independent state. This proletarian thrust to Québécois nationalism was centered around the demand for the primacy of the French language. The Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière was prominent in its demand for French unilingualism and in support of French-only schools for allophone immigrant children. Hundreds of copies of the LSO tabloid Libération were sold at rallies and demonstrations, as the earlier publication La Lutte Ouvrière had also been distributed since the 1964.)

The LSA/LSO during this time intervened in the nationalist milieu with a program that promoted a socialist vision of an independent Quebec state. This orientation, expressed in the concept "For an Independent and Socialist Quebec," enabled the Quebec comrades to increase their credibility, influence and numbers so quickly that branches of the League Socialist Ouvrière were soon established in some major Quebec urban centres. At the same time, the absence of a labor party in Quebec, largely as a result of the failure of the NDP to recognize the right of the Québécois to determine their own future federally and in not identifying with their indépendentiste sentiment provincially, constituted an impasse to creating a unified nationalist movement that was clearly socialist in character. The Québécois working class thus expressed its nationalist aspirations through the petit-bourgeois Parti Québécois. While the LSA advocated the right of self-determination for Quebec in the rest of Canada, the Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière implanted itself as a significant force in the left wing of the Quebec nationalist movement. It was no accident that the mayoralty candidate of the LSO in Montreal was rounded up and jailed on October 15, 1970 when Prime Minister Trudeau proclaimed the War Measures Act in an effort to smash the nationalist movement.

Meanwhile, in English Canada, a second radical development had begun to take shape by the early 1960s. Spurred in large part by the expansion of the US war of aggression against the people of Vietnam, a strong anti-imperialist sentiment developed throughout Canadian society. In late 1971, a spontaneous protest broke out against the testing of a nuclear bomb in Amchitka, Alaska by the US Government, an act widely perceived as threatening to Canada's environment while at the same time escalating the Vietnam war. One million Canadians, including hundreds of thousands of students took to the streets demonstrating in front of US embassies from Newfoundland to Vancouver Island on the day that the tests took place. Such a demonstration of opposition was unprecedented in Canadian history. What was one to make of this event? In attempting to assess its political significance, Ross took note that the

common feature of the demonstrations was an absence of developed political demands. Instead, those who attended the largest demonstrations in Canadian history sang “Oh Canada", Canada’s archaic national anthem. What were revolutionary Marxists to make of this profound outpouring of nationalist sentiment and anger? Ross was astute enough to comment, “Should we have expected them to sing the Internationale?"

Ross employed his dialectical method to the contradictory response of Canadians realizing the significance of the event in the following days and weeks. Ross had only two years earlier dedicated himself to analyzing the unique nature of Canada-US relations. Along with Richard Fidler, who edited the new LSA publication Labour Challenge, he had concluded that, as a result of the geographical juxtaposition of Canada next to the most powerful capitalist state in the world, the Canadian bourgeoisie was among the weakest of any advanced capitalist country in existence, that the United States capitalist class dominated virtually every significant sector of the Canadian economy and that the Canadian ruling class constituted junior partners of US imperialism. This cogent analysis had already been endorsed by a wide majority at the LSA’s 1968 convention, including almost its entire central leadership, and was furthermore widely circulated in a pamphlet published in 1969 entitled “Canada-US Relations."

Now, following the Amchitka protests, Ross characterized this rising Canadian nationalist sentiment, which included a burgeoning movement for autonomy within Canada’s trade unions, as an elemental anti-imperialist sentiment. Rather than reflecting the staid nationalism of the Canadian bourgeoisie, this new nationalist sentiment, he maintained, was in fact challenging the capitalist status quo. This analysis was embraced by the LSA, which began carrying more and more articles in its press on this issue. In adopting this analysis, the movement’s approach was compared to Trotsky’s analysis of the nationalist sentiment among the Catalonians against the central Spanish state in the 1930s, which Trotsky had characterized as “the envelope of their social indignation.”

Ross thus applied the movement’s earlier economic analysis to the Amchitka protests, drawing from such analysis the political and programmatic lessons to be learned. Such analysis went contrary to a dogmatic interpretation of orthodox Marxism in which nationalism in an advanced capitalist country was perceived to be by definition reactionary. Dialectician that he was, he urged that, while we are internationalists, we should identify with the nationalist sentiment insofar as it expressed democratic and anti-imperialist sentiments. Ross quickly convinced the rest of the comrades to follow his lead in framing transitional demands in the context of Canadian nationalism.

The validity of this analysis had meanwhile already become apparent in yet a third significant development. From the mid-60s until the close of the 1960s, the NDP had remained on the political sidelines during the period of the burgeoning movements against the war in Vietnam, for student power, and for women’s liberation, all of which reflected the international student and youth radicalization. Nevertheless, throughout this time, the LSA maintained the NDP as the focus of its politics, seeking to educate its new young recruits and the left in general on the centrality of the NDP as Canada’s labor party, and the need to win it to the role of an anti-war, pro-feminist, pro-student party.

Sensing an opportunity to make the Party relevant again, NDP Leader David Lewis suddenly steered the Party to the left, explicitly identifying with the anti-war movement, attacking US imperialism by name at an Ottawa rally of 10,000 against the war in Vietnam in 1970. Shortly thereafter, the NDP stood alone in opposing the War Measures Act and shortly thereafter, it ran a federal election campaign in which a high profile attack on “corporate welfare bums” became the NDP’s major theme. The NDP was becoming prominent again.

Then suddenly and unexpectedly, within a very short period of time, the nationalist sentiment intersected with the Ontario NDP and labor movement resulting in the formation of the Waffle group within the party in Ontario and soon afterwards in BC, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and the Maritimes. Calling for massive public ownership of Canada's industries and financial institutions, the Waffle's program gained wide appeal and support throughout the party, initially (at least verbally) even from some among its leadership. Thus, as an amalgam of trade unionists, economic nationalists and anti-war activists and academics headed by Professors Mel Watkins and Jim Laxer, the Waffle infused the NDP with radical demands framed within a nationalist context.

During this time, demands for public ownership of runaway plants, preservation of Canadian social programs and services, and against the erosion of these public services on the US model, as well as explicit opposition to Canada's role as handmaiden to the United States war machine, and in addition demands for autonomy and democracy in the US-dominated international unions as well as increasing demands to quit the North American Treaty Organization (NATO), all suddenly became commonplace, as did demands for the recognition of Quebec's right to self-determination—all these issues being posed by Waffle and debated throughout the NDP right across the country.

However, in a confrontation with the NDP brass and union tops which took place in Orillia, Ontario in 1972 and attended by more than 700 delegates and observers from the Ontario NDP, the majority of the delegates at the Provincial Council meeting passed a resolution calling on the Waffle to disband because it had allegedly become a "party within a party." Forty percent of the delegates, however, defended the Waffle. League members who had been active in the Waffle organized a stay-and-fight campaign. However, a majority of Wafflers chose to leave the NDP to found the Movement for an Independent Socialist Canada, or MISC for short. The new organization, however, soon fizzled, as it became quickly isolated from the labor movement and its centre of politics in the NDP. Still, as a left nationalist current, the Waffle had embraced socialism and succeeded in forming the largest-ever opposition within the NDP, and since.

Ross in Europe (1963)

There was another significant achievement that Ross made in the 1960s. In 1963, along with Joe Hanson (central leader of the US Socialist Workers' Party who had served as Trotsky's bodyguard in Mexico City during his exile there in the 1930s), Ross left Canada for Europe in 1963. Their purpose was to attempt to reunify the forces of world Trotskyism, which had been divided for a decade following the split with Michel Pablo. The need for unity was urgent. The Pabloite line had proven wrong. A new radicalization was presenting opportunities that only a unified international could take advantage of. Following conferences with Pierre Frank from France, Livio Maitan from Italy, and Ernest Mandel from Belgium-all formerly key supporters of Pablo and the most important leaders of the Fourth International in Europe-a decision to reunify the forces of world Trotskyism was made. The Reunification Congress took place that same year; Ross was elected to the United Secretariat; and the various sections of the Fourth International became better poised to play central roles in the 1960's radicalization across the globe. In various countries, dozens of youth looking to break from both Stalinism and reformism, turned to a unified Fourth International as a pole of attraction.

As Ross began his work in Europe with the Fourth International at its headquarters in France, he became increasingly uneasy with the structural forms of organization on that continent. His method of operation differed significantly from that of the European comrades. The Canadian movement was organized on the British model, with comrades active in the branches where they lived, meeting weekly and doing fraction work in their same area of political work. The European comrades tended to organize

provisionally as “cellules” in their work areas, holding membership meetings in their metropolitan areas less frequently. This gave European organizations a looseness and lack of cohesion in the way they worked, without the same geographical rootedness the movement had in Canada.

Recognizing his talents and abilities, the comrades of the United Secretariat asked Ross to help develop the program for the Algerian Revolution then underway, in which Michel Pablo was playing an influential role. Ross objected to this assignment complaining that the program should be worked out by the Algerian comrades themselves, who were most familiar with the situation. He did not feel comfortable playing the role of a mentor parachuted into an area he was unfamiliar with, and felt that he was being substituted for the forces on the ground. He argued that the Fourth International had to be based on strong and rooted national sections, not directed from outside.

Ross instead returned to Canada a few months later, where he helped popularize the Tripoli Program, which was eventually adopted as a result of the work of the Algerian comrades themselves. The LSA sent comrades to Algeria to study, organized tours in its defence, and distributed thousands of copies of the Tripoli Program throughout the country and elsewhere. This was the way Ross felt the Canadian comrades could best help defend the Algerian Revolution.

An ill-fated transfer of leadership

As the 1960s drew to a close, and as new and vital forces continued to be drawn into the movement, Ross decided to transfer the leadership of the LSA completely over to the younger layer of leading cadre who had emerged over the previous decade. Ross eventually resigned his position as Executive Secretary in 1972, nominating in his place John Riddell, a former youth activist who had joined the movement in 1960.

In 1970, Ross headed to Europe to again work with the Fourth International at its headquarters in France. However, from afar, he soon began to feel apprehensive about the course the Canadian movement was taking. While in Europe, Ross continued to closely follow Labor Challenge and the Young Socialist and to correspond with comrades in Canada. He soon became increasingly alarmed at the direction the Canadian movement appeared to be taking, notably what he felt was an increasing abandonment of critical and principled politics in its press. Ross returned to Canada within a year of having left.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the LSA and Young Socialists, which had previously recruited members in Toronto one by one and occasionally in twos or threes suddenly found itself the object of interest of organized entire groups of radical youth who were joining the movement. In Toronto, two groups- the Old Mole and the Red Circle-had evolved from the New Left, as the anti-Stalinist left became known, to Marxism and Leninism, although their Leninism was of a form alien to the League. Believing that the League had an obligation to open its doors to all radicalizing forces rather then maintain sectarian purity in solitary isolation, two dozen or so members were admitted to the movement in Toronto following limited discussions and without undergoing common experiences. This suddenly enlarged the League in a way that had not been previously seen.

The new comrades, however, were mainly students and academics who had little or no experience in working class organizations, including the NDP. In Ross’s view, they lacked any rootedness in the traditions and history of the working class, let alone of the Trotskyist movement. He felt they reflected the spirit of impatience that characterized the ultra-leftism that was widespread within the youth radicalization at the time, generated by the inspiration of the Cuban Revolution and crescendoing in the worker-student revolt in France in 1968-69.

Then, to Ross's dismay, the principle of unconditional but critical support for Canada's labor party that had been the major strategic orientation of Canadian Trotskyism for decades was steadily being challenged by a new majority in the LSA. Instead, the LSA began promoting a position of "conditional" support for the NDP and its provincial governments in its press.

Furthermore, notwithstanding the fact that the new leadership under Riddell had for the previous five years embraced Ross's analysis of Canadian economy and that of the emerging anti-imperialist sentiment in Canada, this same leadership suddenly took their distance from this analysis. Instead, they adopted the view that they themselves had rejected back in 1968, namely, that Canada was a major imperialist power and that Canadian nationalism was therefore ipso facto bourgeois and reactionary. Overnight, the Riddell leadership had adapted to the ultra-leftists both within and outside its ranks, which had from the outset opposed and sought to undermine the LSA's longstanding orientation to the NDP as well as attacking its position on Canadian nationalism. This opposition had been centered in the Old Mole and Red Circle tendencies, now both combined and renamed the Revolutionary Communist Tendency (RCT) which categorically rejected 40 years of experience of orientation to the CCF-NDP. Ross suddenly found himself a political stranger in the movement that he had built over several decades.

Factional debates and split

The discussion that took place in the movement during the pre-convention period in 1971 and 1972 designed to deal with these issues became embittered beyond imagination. At the same time, Ernest Mandel, the theoretical and organizational leader of the Fourth International, which itself had adopted at its 1969 World Congress an ultra-left position that declared guerilla warfare as the central strategy for the entire continent of Latin America, entered the fray. Mandel attacked Ross for what he called "tailing" the reformism of the NDP, as well as Canadian "bourgeois nationalism," even though he himself later used the term "imperialized imperialism" to describe countries like Canada that shared features of imperialist and colonized countries simultaneously. Mandel's comments gave the green light to the new opposition within the League thereby adding pressure on the Riddell leadership to adapt to their views. Within a short time Ross Dowson and his supporters-mostly older comrades-found themselves increasingly isolated in the movement Ross had led and built over several decades.

Ross made every possible effort to participate in the discussion that ensued that was supposed to be taking place in an organized way. He wrote several major internal documents in this period dealing with economic analyses of the Canadian economy. Along with Ross' supporters, the Labor Party Tendency (LPT) was formed within the LSA to debate the issues. However, the acrimony of the discussion prevented a meaningful exchange of views. Ross and his comrades in the LPT were faced with a painful decision-either to remain in an organization which had jettisoned the longstanding traditions of the movement, or to leave in order to preserve those traditions, and in so doing, thereby be excluded from the Fourth International. In 1974, the members of the Labor Party Tendency made a decision: they withdrew from the LSA entirely.

Ironically for Ross, the majority of his supporters in the new group had been dissidents and critics in the movement who he had not previously appreciated as cadres.

Part 5: AGAINST THE STREAM

Ross had always understood that the construction of a revolutionary vanguard party did not follow a smooth trajectory.

Shortly after the Labor Party Tendency left the League for Socialist Action, the LSA renamed itself the Revolutionary Workers' League and disintegrated into various sectarian components, each fiercely attacking each other. In retrospect, the decision by the Labor Party Tendency to leave the LSA was a wise one as it avoided entanglement in a group that was frequently described as a "zoo"-in reality, the product of a politically unprincipled fusion of disparate forces.

Upon leaving the LSA, Ross decided to take a break for the better part of half a year at Camp Poundmaker. Wearing a beekeeper's hat and protective rubber overalls, he ventured into the mosquito-infested rocky terrain to plant hundreds of trees. He breathed the country air and came as close to relaxing as his active mind would let him. It was a period of self-exile for Ross and it gave him an opportunity to consider and reflect on the future course of the Trotskyist movement.

Although Ross had seen the legacy of the movement destroyed within the LSA and although he and his co-thinkers, now regrouped within the Socialist League, now felt more isolated, he didn't lose hope or confidence. Instead, he encouraged his fellow-comrades to turn outward and to renew contact with the working class and its political party, the NDP.

Then, Ross was back in Toronto, as suddenly as he left. Very shortly after his return, he worked briefly at various jobs including at a bookstore. Although he had been assured his position was not managerial, his employer asked Ross to fire a worker. He immediately quit his job and went back to life as a full-time revolutionist. The Socialist League, which later became the Forward Group, was formed to maintain continuity with the traditions of the League for Socialist Action. Thirty-five members were present at the first meeting of the SL, which began holding weekly public forums as well as publishing a monthly journal Forward. With offices and a hall behind a bookstore on Gerrard Street West in Toronto, the SL expanding later at to a store at Church and Queen streets, where it remained until the bookstore was forced to close a few years later.

In addition to internal responsibilities, Socialist League members applied themselves externally to various areas of activities including provincial NDP riding associations. Through the Left Caucus of the NDP, the League played a critical role at the federal NDP convention in 1973 in Regina, almost succeeding in winning the party to endorse a Socialist Manifesto to commemorate 50 years since the proclamation of the Regina Manifesto. Comrades intervened frequently and actively in the areas of social protest including the labor movement.

Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, the comrades of the Socialist League, which was renamed the Forward Group in 1978, sustained the ONDP Left Caucus as a large and influential force in an uneasy alliance with other left forces, publishing the Left Caucus Newsletter over the decade 1984-1993. The Left Caucus played a critical role at several provincial and federal conventions, including drafting and arguing for left-wing resolutions and providing an organized forum for the expression of socialist ideas within the NDP.

In defense of Polish Solidarnosc

Following the declaration of martial law in Poland in December 1981, the Forward Group was the only organization on the radical left to unequivocally defend the Solidarnosc movement. Three months earlier, at the height of the Polish union movement's strength, a special exclusive edition of Forward was published containing the entire program of Solidarnosc. The program called for the socialization of the means of production, the democratization of the bureaucratically degenerated Polish economy and its total reconstitution along lines of autonomous self-administration by the working class. Ross personally distributed thousands of copies of the issue in the west end of Toronto where the Polish

population was concentrated in an effort to popularize the radical, pro-socialist platform of Solidarnosc. Forward came to its defence when its leadership was arrested on December 13, 1981. In addition, comrades under Ross' leadership were instrumental in organizing a Committee to Stop the Show Trials, sending monitors to Poland to report on the trials of the leaders of Solidarnosc who were charged by the Stalinist bureaucracy. This was one of several efforts taken under Ross' initiative to defend what he considered to be the most significant workers uprising against Stalinism since the Hungarian revolution in 1956 and the 1969 upheaval in Czeckoslovakia.

Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, the comrades of the Socialist League/ Forward Group continued to play the key role in maintaining the Left Caucus in Ontario as a force within the Party. In particular, SL comrades were active in politics around the Metropolitan Toronto Area Council of the NDP (MTAC). During this time, the municipal arena attracted a large number of NDP activists. The comrades of the Forward Group sustained this area of work, playing a leading role in NDP municipal conferences, promoting New Democrats to run for mayor and participating actively in ward organizations.

Comrades of the Forward Group were also active in the NDP Committee to Preserve Public Education, a formation which worked closely with teachers unions to support a unified public school system and to stop public funding of religious education. This important campaign won widespread support within and outside the NDP, with Gord Doctorow highlighting the issue in his campaign as an NDP candidate in Metro Toronto.

Popularizing the Constituent Assembly

It was also in the early 1980s during the constitutional crisis surrounding the repatriation of Canada's constitution that Ross took the bold and unique initiative among the revolutionary Canadian left of advocating and popularizing the call to convene a Constituent Assembly. In a Forward Group pamphlet widely distributed within the NDP and on the left, Ross called for a broad discussion within the trade unions, professional organizations, schools and universities and other institutions of civil society. Delegates would be selected to attend a central conference to debate the issues of today. All questions would be up for discussion-the right of Native Peoples and the Québécois for self-determination, collective and social rights such as the right to a job and a safe work environment, the right of women to control their bodies, the right to free education and free healthcare. The delegates would then return to their communities where discussion would take place and a vote would be held to determine what a new Canada would look like. This perspective resonated during the victorious campaign for a "No" vote on the Constitution, as leading intellectuals around the Canadian Forum magazine and other forces embraced a similar perspective.

Dowson vs. the RCMP

Perhaps the best-known contribution that Ross personally made during this period was his campaign to expose the crimes of the RCMP directed against the League for Socialist Action as well as other legitimate organizations. On November 1, 1977, following revelations in the Ontario Legislature that the RCMP had interfered in the Waffle wing of the Ontario NDP because of alleged infiltration by the LSA and "ex-Communists," Ross launched a slander suit in Federal Court, claiming damages.

The Socialist Rights Defence Fund was organized to support the suit and it received wide support, including from Noam Chomsky, Linus Pauling, Jessica Mitford, and notable Canadians such as Grace Hartman, Margaret Lawrence, and Pierre Berton. Despite such broad support as well as endorsement of the civil action by major labor councils and by the federal NDP, the RCMP stymied the lawsuit-until it was finally forced by public pressure and embarrassment to admit that it had authorized the forging,

uttering and circulating of false documents within the LSA and YS, which was criminal conduct on its part.

With legal counsel provided by noted Toronto civil rights lawyer Harry Kopyto, the litigation which Ross initiated reached the Supreme Court of Canada on two occasions. On one of those occasions it resulted in a precedent-setting case affirming the historic right of private prosecution. But Ross was never able to achieve a hearing against the RCMP Security Service on the merits of his case against them. Nonetheless, Ross's decades-long campaign against RCMP harassment was the most systematic and effective intervention carried out against the RCMP by any left force in Canada. In fact, the Globe and Mail described Ross's contribution as being "instrumental" in replacing the RCMP Security Service with a civilian review force in the late 1980s.

Although the Forward Group shrank in numbers as did all other groups in the 1980s, Ross continued to struggle to keep alive the ideas that motivated him from the time of his youth. While no longer affiliated formally with the Fourth International, Ross and the comrades of the Forward Group continued to identify with the world Trotskyist movement, circulating its publications and documents, defending its program and its principles, and contributing to it financially.

Ross always held to the perspective that Canadian Trotskyists would eventually once again reconstitute themselves in a common organization. However, he felt that such unity could not be artificially imposed or achieved through a mere wish or desire for unity's sake alone. Rather, meaningful organic unity could only be achieved through an extensive process of collaboration in the unfolding struggles of the Canadian working class itself over a period of time.
In 1989 Ross suffered an unexpected stroke that left him partially paralyzed and unable to speak. For the next thirteen years he was cared for by his devoted sister Lois. His health slowly deteriorated, and finally, on February 17, 2002, Ross died.

It was a day that the bourgeoisie in Canada was able to breathe a little easier.

THE END

This biographical essay is a compilation based on an original script by Harry Kopyto written on April 1, 2002 for the video/DVD production "Ross Dowson, Canadian revolutionary 1917-2002" and includes revisions and editing by Zane Boyd, Gord Doctorow, and John Darling made for the final video/DVD script as presented on June 8, 2002 on Ryerson campus, Toronto.
This website compilation was finally edited by Gord Doctorow, Zane Boyd and John Darling for www.rossdowson.com in late 2004.

Copies of the two-part Memorial video mentioned above, as well as another two-part video being released in 2005 entitled "55 Years of Struggle: Ross Dowson at 70" remastered from a video shot in 1987, both of which include personal reminiscences and testimonials of many of Ross's comrades, will soon be available from john@rossdowson.com

Both will also be available at the Ross Dowson Fonds at National Archives in Ottawa (Political Section) and at Trent University, Peterborough ON as well as at UBC in Vancouver (Ruth & Reginald Bullock Collection).